



# U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

## Kazakhstan

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the various religious communities worship largely without government interference. Although local officials attempt on occasion to limit the practice of religion by some nontraditional groups, higher-level officials or courts usually intervene to correct such attempts.

The overall status of religious freedom deteriorated somewhat during the period covered by this report. Several pieces of recent legislation limit constitutional protections of religious freedom. The Extremism Law enacted in February 2005 allows the Government to criminalize membership in designated political or religious organizations. The Religion Law and related codes were amended through a set of National Security Amendments that were signed into law in July 2005. The amendments impose mandatory registration on missionaries and religious organizations. Several provisions in the new legislation appear to violate the constitutional guarantee of separation of church and state; however, the amendments were not referred to the Constitutional Council for review prior to their passage.

During the period covered by this report, instances of harassment of religious organizations by local officials remained consistent with the previous reporting period. Reports of local law enforcement officials visiting religious organizations for inspections continued to decrease during the reporting period and most religious organizations reported generally good cooperation with the Government.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. The Ambassador and other U.S. officials have supported the country's efforts to increase links and mutual understanding among religious groups. U.S. officials engaged in private and public dialogue at all levels to encourage that any new legislation remain consistent with the country's constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and with the country's tradition of religious tolerance. Embassy and Department of State officials visited religious facilities and met with religious leaders. During the reporting period, the Embassy sponsored a number of exchange programs for Muslim and other religious leaders to meet with a broad and diverse range of their counterparts in the United States. Embassy officials maintained an ongoing dialogue with a broad range of groups within the religious community.

### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 1,052,540 square miles, and according to January 2005 data from the Government's Agency for Statistics, its population is 15,074,200.

The society is ethnically diverse, and many religions are represented. Due in part to the country's nomadic and Soviet past, many residents describe themselves as nonbelievers. Several researchers have reported and surveys have suggested low levels of religious conviction and worship attendance. The Government maintains statistics on the number of registered congregations and organizations but does not keep statistics on the size of each group. The most recent reliable statistics on percent of population subscribing to a particular faith come from the 1999 census. Although there has been a large increase in the number of minority religious congregations registered since 1999, the Government believes that percentages of the population adhering to particular faiths has remained consistent.

Ethnic Kazakhs, who constitute approximately one half of the national population, along with ethnic Uzbeks, Uighurs, and Tatars, who collectively comprise less than 10 percent of the population, are historically Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi School. Other Islamic groups, which account for less than 1 percent of the population, include Shafit Sunni (traditionally practiced by Chechens), Shi'a, Sufi, and Ahmadi. The country's highest concentration of citizens who identify themselves as practicing Muslims is located in the southern regions bordering Uzbekistan. A sizeable population of ethnic Russians, and smaller populations of ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Belarusians, are by tradition Russian Orthodox; together they constitute approximately one-third of the country's population. An estimated 1.5 percent of the population is ethnic German, many of whom are Roman Catholic or Lutheran.

According to government statistics, evangelical Christian and Baptist congregations outnumber Russian Orthodox congregations, although it is unlikely that the number of adherents is also higher. Other Christian associations with a sizable number of congregations include Presbyterians, Lutherans, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, and Pentecostals.

There is a Roman Catholic archdiocese, adherents of which account for 2 percent of the population, including many ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Germans. The Government reported 86 registered Roman Catholic dioceses and organizations throughout the country.

A small Jewish community, estimated at well below 1 percent of the population, has synagogues in several larger cities, including Almaty, Astana, and Pavlodar. Rabbis in Almaty reported an increase in the number of people attending services and religious education during the reporting period.

The Government maintained a list of 73 nontraditional religious groups during the reporting period, including the Hare Krishna movement, the Baha'is, and the Unification Church. Government officials reported a notable increase in registrations of congregations and missionaries affiliated with South Korean Christian churches during the reporting period.

According to government statistics, there were 334 foreign missionaries in the country as of January 2005. The majority of registered missionaries identify themselves as Christian, with many coming from South Korea, Russia, and other former Soviet countries. While there were only 12 registered Muslim foreign missionaries, more are believed to be active in the southern regions of the country.

## **Section II. Status of Religious Freedom**

### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the various denominations worship largely without government interference; however, local and regional officials attempted on occasion to limit or control the practice of religion by several groups, including nontraditional religious communities. The Constitution defines the country as a secular state and provides the right to decline religious affiliation. However, the Government recently enacted National Security Amendments that affect a wide range of codes and laws and place limits on religious freedom, including requiring missionaries and religious groups to register. The amendments give government officials the right to suspend activities of religious groups. The Government continued to express publicly its support for religious tolerance and diversity.

As amended, the National Religion Law explicitly requires religious organizations to register with the Government; however, it continues to provide that all persons are free to practice their religion "alone or together with others." Prior to the amendments, the law required those religious organizations that wished to be accorded the status of legal entities to register. That status is required to buy or rent property, hire employees, or engage in other legal transactions. To register, a religious organization must have at least 10 members and submit an application to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ). In practice, most religious communities choose to register with the Government and are registered without difficulties.

The extremist Islamist political organization Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) is banned and its members are subject to arrest and imprisonment for subversion. HT promotes hate and praises acts of terrorism, although it maintains that it is committed to nonviolence. The party's virulently anti-Semitic and anti-Western literature calls for the overthrow of secular governments, including those in Central Asia, to be replaced with a world-wide Islamic government called the Caliphate. Because HT is primarily a political, not a religious, organization and because of its encouragement of terrorism, authorities' actions to restrict HT and prosecute HT in accordance with international legal norms are not a restriction on religious freedom, per se.

In 2004, the MOJ designed and implemented a new, one-step registration process, and religious groups noted that registration became more efficient during the reporting period. However, local government officials, particularly in remote locations, often insisted that religious organizations also register at the local level, despite the fact that the law specifies that registration at the national level with the MOJ is sufficient. Now Article 9 of the Religion Law explicitly requires registration of local religious organizations with the regional office of the MOJ.

The Council of Churches of Evangelical Christians and Baptists ("Council of Churches") has a policy of not seeking or accepting registration in former Soviet countries. In 1961, the Council of Churches split from the Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, which has no objection to registering its congregations.

The Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Center reported that oblast authorities registered its branch in Northern Kazakhstan Oblast in January 2004 (the 2004 Human Rights Report reported in error that the branch had not been registered) after it had unsuccessfully attempted to register since 1997.

As in previous years, government officials frequently expressed concerns regarding the potential spread of political and religious extremism in the south of the country. The Committee for National Security (KNB) has characterized the fight against "religious extremism" as a top priority of the internal intelligence service. An Extremism Law that came into effect in February 2005 applies to religious and other organizations. Under this law, the Government has broad latitude in identifying and designating a group as

an extremist organization, banning a designated group's activities, and criminalizing membership in a banned organization. On March 28, 2005, the HT political movement was the first organization banned under the Extremism Law. At the end of the reporting period, no apolitical religious organizations had been outlawed as extremist.

The Elections Law prohibits political parties based upon ethnic, gender, or religious affiliation.

In 2002, the Constitutional Council specifically ruled that a legislative provision requiring the Muslim Spiritual Association, a national Muslim organization headed by the Chief Mufti, to approve the registration of any Muslim group violated the constitutional principle separating church and state. The Council also noted more broadly that the amendments might infringe on the constitutional right to spread religious beliefs freely.

In an early 2005 meeting with imams from throughout the country, President Nursultan Nazarbayev reportedly stated that Sunni mosques should affiliate with the Spiritual Administration of Muslims in Kazakhstan (SAMK), led by the Chief Mufti in Almaty. In May 2005, the press reported that the akim (governor) of Southern Kazakhstan oblast, along with heads of regional law enforcement agencies, met with imams of mosques in that oblast in an effort to pressure nonaligned imams and congregations to join the SAMK to ensure liturgical orthodoxy. There were unconfirmed reports that other oblast akims held similar meetings with imams to encourage affiliation with SAMK.

Neither law nor regulation prohibits foreign missionary activity. Foreign missionaries, like all visitors, are required to register with the Migration Police and indicate the purpose of their stay. Under July 2005 amendments to the Religion Law, Kazakhstani and foreign missionaries are required to register annually with the MOJ, and provide information as to religious affiliation, territory of missionary work, and time period for that work. All religious literature and other materials to be used to support missionary work must be provided with the registration application; use of materials not vetted during the registration process is illegal. In addition, missionaries must produce registration documents for the sponsoring registered religious organization and a power of attorney from the sponsoring organization to allow the missionary to work on its behalf. The MOJ may refuse registration to missionaries whose work would be inconsistent with the law, including laws prohibiting incitement of interethnic or interreligious hatred. The Constitution requires foreign religious associations to conduct their activities, including appointing the heads of religious associations, "in coordination with appropriate state institutions." Foreigners are permitted under the law to register religious organizations; however, they generally are required to list a majority of local citizens among the 10 founders of the organization.

During the reporting period, two groups reported difficulty in obtaining registration for their missionaries and several religious groups reported that foreign missionaries experienced visa difficulties. There were credible reports that foreign missionaries of several religions were denied appropriate visas to allow them to legally conduct missionary activity, and were instead denied visas or issued tourist visas, the terms of which prohibit missionary activity. In other cases, several Christian and Muslim missionaries reported that visas were issued for shorter terms than in previous years. Some foreign missionaries reported good cooperation with local and national authorities.

The Government does not permit religious instruction in public schools. Children must attend secular schools through high school; some secular schools are private. Home-schooling is not permitted, except for children at the pre-school level. Parents may enroll children in supplemental religious education provided by registered religious organizations.

The National Security Amendments include a provision that religious training of a child shall not cause damage to a child's all-around development or physical or "moral" health. The amendment provides no further clarification of how such damage should be judged and which agency would be the competent authority to make such a determination. The current law does not allow religious groups to educate children without approval from the Ministry of Education, making lack of such approval a ground for refusing to register a religious organization whose charter includes provisions for religious education. The Ministry of Education issued a circular in early 2005 instructing teachers to be alert in detecting behavior that indicated that children were being exposed to political or religious extremism. The Government exempted registered religious organizations from taxes on both church collections and income from certain religious activities. The Government has donated buildings, land, and provided other assistance for the construction of new mosques, synagogues, and Russian Orthodox churches.

The Government invited the national leaders of the two largest religious groups, Islam and Russian Orthodoxy, to participate jointly in some state events; Roman Catholic and Jewish leaders have been included in such events as well. Leaders of other faiths, including Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists, and other nontraditional religious groups, at times also have participated in some events.

### **Restrictions on Religious Freedom**

Under the amended Religion Law, the Government may deny registration based upon an insufficient number of adherents or inconsistencies between the provisions of a religious organization's charter and the law. Under the Law on Public Associations, a registered organization, including a religious group, may have all activities suspended by court order for a period of 3 to 6 months for defiance of the Constitution or laws, or for systematic pursuit of activities that contradict the charter and bylaws of the organization as registered. In February 2005, Parliament amended this law to empower police, prosecutors and citizens to petition a court to suspend the activities of a registered organization on the basis of failure to remove violations or repeated violations of the law. This amendment was passed at the same time the Extremism Law was adopted.

During a suspension, the organization is prohibited from speaking with the media on behalf of the organization; holding meetings, gatherings or services; and undertaking financial transactions other than meeting ongoing contractual obligations, such as paying salaries. In previous years, the Government typically claimed that religious groups' charters did not meet the requirements of the law when refusing or significantly delaying registration. Often authorities cited discrepancies between Russian and Kazakh language versions of groups' charters or referred charters for expert examination.

Article 375 of the Administrative Code allows authorities to suspend the activities or fine the leaders of unregistered groups. Recent amendments to the Religion Law incorporate language consistent with Article 375. In the few administrative cases brought under Article 375 during the period covered by this report, prior to the addition of explicit language on registration to the Religion Law, the court of first instance usually acquitted the accused.

Procurators have the right to inspect organizations registered with state bodies once a year; there were no reports that these inspections, when they occurred, were overly intrusive or were considered harassment by any religious groups inspected. Where religious groups operated as legal entities, such as by running collective farms and restaurants or operating orphanages, authorities conducted health, sanitation, and other inspections relevant to the nature of the entities' operations. These inspections also provided the authorities with information about the registration status of the groups being inspected.

Although the national Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Center noted generally positive relations with the national Government, the group alleged several incidents of harassment by local governments. Although local Jehovah's Witnesses organizations are formally registered at the national level and in 13 oblasts, the Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Center has attempted unsuccessfully to register in Atyrau Oblast since 2001. Their most recent application was turned down in March 2004 for alleged discrepancies between the Kazakh and Russian language versions of their charter. It claimed that city officials sometimes denied the group permits to rent stadiums and other large public or private sites for religious meetings. However, the Center also reported that government treatment of these requests varied. No other religious groups have reported similar instances of occasionally being denied permits.

There were no reports that local representatives of the KNB or police officials disrupted meetings in private homes during the period covered by this report. Several groups did report that local law enforcement representatives attended their services, although their presence generally was not considered disruptive. The Council of Churches reported that in April 2004, local police disrupted a church service in Arkalyk by videotaping the service without the congregants' permission.

During the reporting period, the Council of Churches noted several court cases against churchgoers for participating in the activities of an unregistered group. When individuals were found to be guilty of violating section 375 of the Administrative Code, courts imposed a fine. Council of Churches members usually refused to pay fines levied by courts for non-registration and there were no reports of the Government forcing payment.

In May 2005, according to news source Forum 18, a court in Zaisan fined Baptist leader Igor Isakov \$129.50 (17,478 tenge) for refusing to register his congregation. In July 2004, Vilgelm Dik, also a member of the Council of Churches, was found guilty of violating the Administrative Code by not registering his congregation, and was fined \$47.65 (6,433 tenge). Dik did not appeal or pay the fine during the reporting period. In late 2004, Aleksei Buka, of Karganada oblast, was fined \$47.65 (6,433 tenge) for belonging to an unregistered religious group; his case was overturned on appeal in March 2005. The congregations to which Isakov, Dik and Buka belonged maintained their refusal to register. In Nikolayevka, Almaty Oblast, Aleksandr Kalmakov was fined for his group's failure to register; he reported that court bailiffs harassed him to pay the fine early in 2004, but he still refused to pay the fine at the end of 2004. There were no new developments in the 2002-2003 case of Eastern Kazakhstan Oblast Council of Churches Baptist pastor Sergey Nizhegorodtsev, who refused to pay a fine levied for failure to register his congregation.

No court cases against unregistered local Jehovah's Witnesses congregations were reported. The Jehovah's Witnesses Religious Center has attempted unsuccessfully to register in Atyrau Oblast since 2001.

Although the Hare Krishna movement was registered at the national level, followers reported some continued local government and police harassment during the year. In August 2004, the Hare Krishna community in Almaty oblast held an annual convention with foreign guests. Two weeks before the event began, the community filed a formal request with oblast authorities to hold the gathering, but received no response. The Hare Krishna community reported that seven foreign invitees were briefly detained and released with a warning for violation of the immigration law. However, in contrast to previous years, no Hare Krishna followers were deported during the convention. During this weeklong gathering, law enforcement representatives visited the convention on a daily basis, conducting health, sanitation, and other inspections of the premises to ensure compliance with the law.

According to Hare Krishna leaders, the authorities made frequent inspections of the Krishnas' settlement outside Almaty. In September 2004, the Hare Krishna farm was the subject of 11 inspections by different government agencies including the police, fire protection service, sanitary agency, environment protection agency and land committee, and subsequently fined for different violations of the law. The Hare Krishnas admitted several violations, which they attempted to rectify, but maintained that they had been subjected to closer scrutiny than their neighbors. The Hare Krishnas were subject to litigation related to their ownership and use of a collective farm in Almaty Oblast. In February 2005, one of two outstanding lawsuits was settled in favor of the Hare Krishna commune, and the other case was dismissed without prejudice. Notwithstanding these inspections and lawsuits, Hare Krishna leaders reported that in general, conditions for their community improved during the year.

In 2003, the SAMK was reported to have removed from their mosques five imams who participated in a U.S. Government-sponsored Community Connections exchange program to the United States. Following a request by the U.S. Ambassador, the five imams were reinstated in their positions.

Observers also believe that security officials informally monitor some religious activity, particularly Muslim imams' sermons; however no suggestion has been made that any monitoring had the character of interference or harassment.

The Ahmadi Muslim community reported difficulties in obtaining visas and registration for foreign missionaries invited to the country throughout the reporting period, primarily in South Kazakhstan Oblast. In early 2005, after numerous requests by the Ahmadi community, foreign missionary Asan Takhir Sayid Bukhari was eventually granted a three-month visa and allowed to register after numerous appeals to local authorities. In 2002, Bukhari encountered visa and residency registration problems that were resolved in early 2004 through the intervention of government officials in Astana.

Both the national Government and the national Muslim organization SAMK deny that there is any official connection between them. However, the Government has proposed several times in recent years, in the form of amendments to the Religion Law, that the organization assume a quasi-official role by determining which Muslim groups be allowed to register with authorities and by approving the construction of new mosques. In 2002, the Constitutional Council ruled that these provisions of the proposed amendments were unconstitutional; however, several akims were reported to have exerted pressure on imams and mosques to align themselves with the SAMK.

Several religious groups, including the Hare Krishnas and Jehovah's Witnesses, reported that they had been the subject of a news account portraying them, or nontraditional religions in general, as a threat to security or society. Some of the news accounts appeared in government-controlled media.

### **Abuses of Religious Freedom**

As in the previous reporting period, there were no reports of the prolonged detention of members of religious organizations for proselytizing. On occasion the authorities took action against groups engaged in proselytizing; however, such actions were limited to the confiscation of religious literature and brief detentions.

There were no reports of religious detainees or prisoners.

### **Forced Religious Conversions**

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Abuses by Terrorist Organizations**

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

### **Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom**

Despite legislative setbacks during the reporting period, the country remains a leader in the former Soviet Union for its encouragement of religious tolerance and its respect for the rights of religious minorities. Religious leaders praised the role the Government played in ensuring their right to peaceful practice of their religious beliefs. Some perceived the Chairman of the Secretariat of the Council on Relations with Religious Communities and the Ombudsman's Office as advocates for religious freedom within the Government.

National and regional officials continued to be active in reducing restrictions on religious freedom and harassment of religious groups by local officials. The frequency of higher-level intervention has generally reduced harassment of religious groups at the local level. During the period covered by this report, activism by national and regional officials continued to bring resolution to longstanding conflicts between nontraditional religious groups and local authorities. The resolution of two court cases against the Hare Krishna commune in Almaty reflected an equitable application of the law.

Government officials in Astana reported that an oblast-level commission was formed in early 2004 to look into the multiple instances of harassment in the past several years. Hare Krishna followers at the commune said there has been a reduction in government harassment since that time.

President Nazarbayev announced that he would continue his "Peace and Harmony" initiative by hosting the second Congress of World Religions in Astana in the autumn of 2006 and inviting several previously unrepresented groups. The President remains engaged with international religious leaders and communities. In June 2004, he met with Rabbi Arthur Schneier of the American-based Appeal of Conscience foundation during his visit to the country.

The openings of two new large religious facilities in Astana were well received. A new synagogue opened in September 2004, followed by the opening of the Grand Mosque in March 2005. High-ranking government officials participated in opening ceremonies for both facilities.

According to government statistics, the number of registered religious groups has risen steadily over the last few years. In January 2005, there were 3,259 registered religious groups, compared with 3,157 in 2004 and 3,016 in 2003. The Union of Evangelical Christians and Baptists, for example, grew from 254 registered affiliated groups in 2003 to 291 in 2005. Nontraditional "charismatic" Protestant congregations rose from 401 in 2003 to 450 in 2005.

The Government made efforts to promote religious tolerance in its ranks. In April 2004, the Ministry of Internal Affairs invited the country's Chief Rabbi to give seminars to its police officers on sensitivity to religious minorities. Human rights training provided to law enforcement officers by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in cooperation with the government included information on religious rights under the law.

There were no reports of incidents of anti-Semitism by the Government. In August 2004, the Chief Rabbi of Kazakhstan, addressing an international religious conference in Brussels, stated that in 10 years in the country he had never faced a single case of anti-Semitism. He praised the Government of Kazakhstan for its pro-active protection of the Jewish community. Other than the actions of members of the extremist HT political movement, who printed and distributed leaflets that supported anti-Semitism among other beliefs, there were no reports of anti-Semitic incitement or acts during the year.

### Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. The country is multiethnic, with a long tradition of tolerance and secularism. Since independence the number of mosques and churches has increased greatly. The population, particularly in rural areas, is sometimes wary of nontraditional religions.

In October 2004, the media reported a conflict between missionaries from Missionary Center Grace Rakhim (**CONFIRMING THE NAME**) and local Muslims in a village in Akmola Oblast. The missionaries, who identified themselves as Presbyterian Christians, were reportedly threatened, beaten, and exiled from the village when they attempted to convert local residents.

Several Members of Parliament were quoted in the press expressing suspicion of nontraditional religions, including the Jehovah's Witnesses and evangelical Christian movements. Leaders of the four traditional religions, Islam, Russian Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism and Judaism, reported general acceptance and tolerance that was not always enjoyed by minority religions. Other than the report of violence against missionaries from Grace Rakhim, there were no reports of this mistrust leading to violence.

### Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. officials emphasized that bilateral cooperation on economic and security issues is a complement to, not a substitute for, meaningful progress on human rights, including religious freedom. The Ambassador and Embassy officers remained heavily engaged in dialogue with the Government to encourage assurance that any legislation relating to religious freedom be drafted through a transparent legislative process and that it reflect the country's international commitments to respect individuals' rights to peaceful expression of religion.

U.S. officials expressed concern at high levels over the Extremism Law prior to its passage. Following passage of the law, U.S. officials remained engaged with the Government to encourage that the law be implemented in a manner that least restricted religious practice.

The Ambassador and other Embassy officials coordinated with other embassies and international human rights organizations to promote public debate on several pieces of draft legislation that had implications for the religious community, including proposed National Security Amendments and a proposed Non-governmental Organization (NGO) Law. U.S. government officials at the Embassy and in Washington prepared analyses of draft laws and used these as a basis for informal discussions and formal demarches to the Government. The Ambassador gave several interviews in which he publicly reiterated the U.S. position against legislation that did not appear to meet international standards of protecting religious freedom and other fundamental rights.

The Embassy maintained contact with a broad range of religious communities and reported on violations of their constitutional and human rights. U.S. Department of State officials met with government officials and members of faith-based groups in the country and Embassy officials raised several cases of local harassment with government officials, who generally worked to resolve these cases, ensuring an equitable application of the laws. Senior government officials from Washington, including the Deputy Secretary and the Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, met with senior government officials to raise religious freedom concerns related to several pieces of legislation that were being considered by the Parliament, including the Extremism Law and National Security Amendments that were passed during this reporting period. In October 2004, a staff member of Office of Religious Freedom met with government officials, religious leaders and human rights advocates to discuss the proposed Extremism Law.

In November 2004, during Ramadan, the Ambassador and Embassy officials hosted separate Iftars, or Auz Ashars, in Almaty and Astana for local Muslim leaders, Islamic scholars, and diplomats from Muslim countries. Embassy officials regularly attended public events in support of the religious community, in addition to participating in roundtables and other public debates on issues of religious freedom and tolerance. U.S. officials in country and in Washington were in regular contact with NGOs following religious freedom issues, including the Almaty Helsinki Committee and the Kazakhstan Bureau of International Human Rights and Rule of Law.

During the reporting period, the U.S. added a religious component to its overall development strategy for the country. Implementing organizations and a recently hired regional Religion, State and Society Specialist, based in Tashkent, have been working to increase outreach to religious communities in Shymkent. This included attending the Almaty Iftar/Auz Ashar during Ramadan and organizing a media tour of implementing organizations that publicized the scope of the contributions, including civil society development, that these partners provide to the country. In addition, Mission officials held meetings with implementing organizations and staff to discuss what role religious leaders can play in development efforts and to encourage partners to reach out to local religious leaders in their work.

The Embassy conducted exchange programs for religious leaders and human rights observers during the period covered by this report. In October 2004, government officials and human rights advocates participated in a program that focused on human rights monitoring, including promotion of religious freedom. Participants were briefed on the U.S. legal framework of religious rights protection, met with religious freedom advocates, and toured the U.S. Holocaust Museum.

In July 2004, the Embassy sponsored a 3-week exchange program on "Islam in America" for 10 Muslim leaders and teachers. The visit included meetings with U.S. government officials, academics, NGO leaders, and American Muslim community leaders. In 2003, the Embassy sponsored similar visits to the United States of groups of imams and other Muslim religious leaders from Kyzyl-Orda, Zhambyl, and Southern Kazakhstan Oblasts. They were also hosted by U.S. families and participated in religious services. In 2004 and 2005, as a follow-up to these programs, the Embassy co-sponsored several "alumni reunions" including a lunch hosted by the Ambassador and a regional conference featuring an American keynote speaker.

In February 2005, the Embassy hosted an expert to speak in Almaty and Shymkent on religion in America and the African-American Muslim community. This program reached a wide audience through public appearances, academic lectures, and media interviews.

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